

This is a transcript from Christine Cavalier's podcast called PurpleCar Park. In this episode of the podcast PurpleCar Park, Christine Cavalier interviews author Oliver Burkeman about his latest book, The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking. If you use any part of this transcript, please credit Christine Cavalier and www.purplecar.net. The APA Magazine style citation is as follows:

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Transcript 21 December 2012

(Music)

(Introduction by The Matthew Show)

It's time to put on the brakes and pull into PurpleCar Park, your stop for book reviews, author interviews, and thoughts about the act of reading in our super-digital, data-driven world. Hosted by Miss PurpleCar herself, Christine Cavalier.

Christine Cavalier: Today on PurpleCar Park I have with me journalist Oliver Burkeman, the author of the Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking. You can find Mr. Burkeman on Twitter as @oliverburkeman and at his regular column at the Guardian about Psychology and wellbeing, entitled, "This Column Will Save Your Life." You can also visit his blog and website at <http://www.oliverburkeman.com>. Welcome Oliver!

Oliver Burkeman: Hey thanks very much for having me on.

Christine Cavalier: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking was described by another interviewee of mine, Daniel Pink, author of Drive, as a counter to *"...a self-help tradition in which positive thinking too often takes the place of actual thinking."* Mr. Pink goes on to say, you, Oliver point *"...our attention to several of philosophy's deeper traditions and does so with a light hand and a wry sense of humor."* Why do Brits seem so amused by the American fascination with happiness?

Oliver Burkeman: [Laughs]. It's a good question, but it's also a slightly tricky question because actually the Brits are fairly obsessed with this positive thinking stuff as well. I think we like to think that we aren't, and I certainly think that may there's a sort of national character that we're a little more downbeat. In general, I think [we're] hugely admiring of and jealous of in all sorts of ways our American cousins, but also, you know, there's like kind of slight wryness as you point out towards this kind of culture. What I try to do in this book ... maybe the first chapter is more of a sort of demolition of that kind of culture, but I really wanted to try explore some alternatives after explaining why I think positive thinking doesn't work.

I wanted to avoid that thing that I think of as very British, which is just to say, *"Oh, you know, this doesn't work so therefore happiness can't be achieved and I'm just going to be a curmudgeon and sort of laugh about how terrible everything is."* So I'm hoping that it's [not] sort of either stereotypically American or British.

Christine Cavalier: I realized you were British once I saw that you wrote for the Guardian, so I didn't actually find that in the book to be an overwhelming theme. I just really like their almost cynical view of happy we are here, you know, *"happy"*, and how we really look towards positive thinking. We have all these things in the culture about sports psychology and how to achieve goals and things of that nature. It seems as though there is very many similar things between the cultures. What were some of the downsides of positive thinking that really annoyed you? What were the ones that most inspired you to write this book?

Oliver Burkeman: Well, I had been writing, as you said, this column in the Guardian for some years that was meant to be a sort of, I hope, skeptical but not cynical take on self-help, self-help culture and this whole new trend of happiness science and psychology (in academic psychology as well). The thing that really annoyed me at a sort of abstract overview level was that all of the stuff I came across that didn't seem to work, that I found kind of irritating, that hadn't been backed by good research, seemed largely to have this thing in common, this idea of positive thinking. What I mean by that is particularly this idea that there's something about trying so hard to be happy that stops us, that gets in the way of doing so. So it's not just that the techniques don't work, [it's] that they have the opposite effect. There is something about that struggle that is just not a happy-making thing.

You see that manifested in lots of lots of different ways, I think, as I say in the book: visualizing the best case scenario; setting very ambitious goals; using self-help

affirmations. There are many, many manifestations of that idea, some of them more mockable than others. I actually think all of us, to some extent, maybe not all of us [but] most of us are seduced by this general idea (not necessarily by the most extreme versions of it: the big motivational seminars), ... that the way to be happy and successful is to focus hard on happiness and success. It's just that basic focus that is really annoying. Obviously it has specific versions that are more absurd than others, but that's the basic underlying problem.

Christine Cavalier: Yeah ... we won't name names exactly, but I've definitely read some books that have a lot of shame underlying the message (e.g): *"If you cannot keep up your positive attitude, it's your fault."* You know? *"If your life is not positive, it's because you are weak in mind, in willpower."*

Oliver Burkeman: Right.

Christine Cavalier: That *"good things will come to you if you think good things will come to you."* You know there is a certain ring of truth to this: it's also a very simple way to look at the world and those things are always so enticing, right? Simple rules?

Oliver Burkeman: Right, and I mean, I'm not saying it can never have any positive effect. In a mild way if you can do it gently, choosing a brighter thought than a darker one may well be in the short term, in a mild way, quite helpful. But firstly, when it's in overdrive it's a problem, and secondly, as you point out, this responsibility idea, that because you are using "changing your thoughts to change your life", if you haven't changed your life or bad things happen, then you've been thinking in the wrong way, or you haven't thought positively enough. And that just turns into one big guilt trip, rather than any kind of self-help technique that's really worthy of the name.

Christine Cavalier: You frame the book by a personal journey of going to meet with some key figures.

Oliver Burkeman: Right.

Christine Cavalier: How did you pinpoint which people you wanted to meet with and interview?

Oliver Burkeman: That's always a slightly trial-and-error process, when you do a book like this because you have to know a little bit in advance that the person you're going to see is going to be relevant to your thinking. But on the other hand you have to not know for certain otherwise you wouldn't be finding anything out on your journey. So, I knew from the beginning that I would need to look closely at Stoicism, the ancient Greek and Roman philosophical tradition, and Buddhism, because they both, it seems to me, embody ideas that are very much the opposite of positive thinking. They have very much to do with turning towards negative experiences and emotions.

Christine Cavalier: Tell us really quickly who the stoics are.

Oliver Burkeman: The Stoics were, and there are still people today, and I meet one or two of them, who live by that today. But the Stoics date back to ancient Greece and Rome. They were a philosophical school that emerged not long after the death of Aristotle. So it's really around the earliest days of what we know as Philosophy today, including people who were some of the key philosophers who experienced themselves very awful life conditions, either being born into slavery or, Seneca, who was actually a nobleman forced to commit ritual suicide. These are people who had pretty terrible lives in various ways. It sort of emerges from that: A philosophy of how to deal with the distress that you'll feel when things go wrong in life comes out this situation where actually quite a lot did go very wrong, and their fundamental insight is that it's our *beliefs* about events rather than the events themselves that causes distress. That sounds slightly positive thinking thing to say. [The Stoics] would then say, I think, that it doesn't follow that you should then try to make your beliefs as upbeat as possible but that you should bring them in tune with what they thought was rationality, reality. There's a lot to be said for your emotional life, in learning to have beliefs that are somehow proportionate to the way things are rather than disproportionate and thereby upsetting.

Christine Cavalier: [The Stoics] do leave a bit to be desired in terms of answers when it comes to what to do with your thoughts. You went a different way and found an answer to that. Can you tell me more about how you answered the question about controlling your thoughts?

Oliver Burkeman: Right, where this is sort where it gets progressively deeper and deeper. I suppose that's how I've organized the journey in the book. You know, the Stoics first of all say, "*Well, hang on it's your thoughts, not events that are causing distress.*" The Buddhists say, "*You can learn to resist the urge to try and manipulate those thoughts, and just to be present with them instead.*" And then, when you sort of plunge off the deep end of the work of Eckart Tolle (which is obviously heavily influenced by Buddhism and it's new age and full of a big melting pot), he's really then starting from this notion where the self that you think of as doing all this thinking [is] a problematic notion. We make all sorts of assumptions about the idea that I am my self and the thoughts in my head are me, and I identify with them, that thinking is the default of state of being. [Tolle] suggests that actually you can take a vantage point that is not your thoughts, in which you are the witness of those thoughts. Then you know, it gets really sort of, very mystical and the idea that maybe that individual humans are in some sense an illusion. There are all these approaches. ... They are all very different, but the thing they have in common is this turning towards negativity, which is why I grouped [them under] the label as the negative path to happiness in the book.

They all do this, in one way or another, by objectifying thoughts and emotions, by seeing them as something other than fully definitive view of self. So the waves is a metaphor, then other classic one in modern day contemporary Buddhist teaching is weather. ... You see your thoughts and feelings as clouds, as sun as rain, passing across the sky. The mind is the sky.

Christine Cavalier: You say in the book about how we could no quicker control our breathing or think we have any control over it, for long periods of time, than we can control our thoughts.

Oliver Burkeman: Right, well just this idea that your body is a whole huge complex system of processes that you don't really have any control over, even if you imagine that you do.

Christine Cavalier: Ok, but what you're saying there is definitely something original in terms of your thoughts being physical processes.

Oliver Burkeman: I think we're sort of talking along the boundary of a metaphor and literalism. I mean, firstly I think a lot of these ideas are actually really old, but ... some of them are definitely new in the contemporary psychological context. The part that I'm thinking of here is the insight in early Buddhist Psychology by which thinking is conceptualized as another sense. So sounds come in through the ears; sight comes in through the eyes. Taste comes in through the tongue, and thoughts are projected onto the screen of the mind. So it's a very interesting way of thinking about thinking, because we tend to assume that thinking is much more essential to us. The things we see, and all that, that's obviously that's just data from the outside. But the idea of thoughts as well as being a kind of sense does sort of fundamentally change the stance that you take towards them. As I encountered in researching the book, you spend a few days at a silent meditation retreat watching your thoughts, you very swiftly realize that you don't have a lot of control over what is going on inside your mind. You are as out of control in that regard as you are about the temperature in the meditation hall or the fact that you're hungry and you'd really like it to be dinnertime.

Christine Cavalier: Right!

Oliver Burkeman: It's kind of liberating, I think, when you have that realization.

Christine Cavalier: I feel like the book, when I was reading through it, begged the question of happiness and what it is.

Oliver Burkeman: Right.

Christine Cavalier: In the beginning, you assumed a general knowledge of what happiness is. We can all point to motivational seminars (you start with a motivational seminar), we all kind of know what you're talking about. But we get to the end of the book and find out that we don't actually know what happiness is. What happened? How did you come to a different definition at the end?

Oliver Burkeman: That's definitely a true account of my journey in writing this book. To start off with the assumption, in other words, that I was going to be exploring a different route to the same destination, and then to realize as a result of going on that journey that actually the destination itself is very much in question as well. So I hope that this

the effect I want it to have, on the reader, on sort of pulling the rug out from underneath them. I think [happiness is] a placeholder word that we use. One thing I do say near the beginning of the book is that a lot of what I'm looking at here is applicable regardless of your view of what happiness is. So in other words, where I talk about the benefits of pessimism in certain contexts, I think that is true whether your definition of happiness is a warm, loving family and some absorbing hobbies, or whether you think it is making 50 million dollars, these problems with trying too hard to get certain things affect both of those kinds of goals. But then what I hope happens, because it happened to me in the course of researching it and reporting it, is really that I reached a conclusion that there is no definitive term. [Happiness] is not a thing that makes any sense to think cognitively about, [or] trying to aim for. The kind of thing that I think you get if you were to embody all of these philosophies that I talk about, is a kind of authenticity, a kind of realism, the feeling which ... I'd want to feel on my deathbed, you know, that I had been present for it all in life. That I had experienced the highs and the lows, that I hadn't just experienced the highs and somehow managed to screen out the lows. Which is, I think, what positive thinking and allied approaches try and ultimately will fail to do. So, I don't really apologize for not being able to sum up happiness in sentence. I think actually in many ways letting go of the need to do that is one of the effects that I, in my dreams, this book would have on the person reading.

Christine Cavalier: I think that it's timely because a lot of people are having second thoughts about the books that have come out in the last decade of positive thinking. The corporations are going crazy for this stuff, but the workers who go through the trainings, and who are sent to these motivational seminars, something is going wrong and they smell a rat.

Oliver Burkeman: Right.

Christine Cavalier: But they have no way expressing this. They have no way of saying, *"Wait a second. Let's step back"* or else they'll be labeled a cynic.

Oliver Burkeman: Companies that could really benefit so much from thinking about what can go wrong, as well as how thing could go right. There's of plenty evidence now that it really helps to have a pessimist or two on your team. Not as sort of cranky obnoxious person who is just going to tell everyone else they suck, but someone whose natural bearing toward the world is to take account of things that could really go wrong in the future; that's a very useful mindset to have. In *Defense of Pessimism*, Julie Norem the psychologist ... says that about 1/3 of Americans use [the pessimistic mindset] instinctively. This is not about being terribly terribly gloomy; this is about having a sense of multiple different ways in which projects can turn out.

... people then sometimes say, *"What if you're depressed? What about actual real depression in a clinical sense, in a severe sense. You certainly don't mean that's good."* I say, *"Well no of course I don't mean that's good, but I sure as hell mean that positive thinking is not a good response to that."* Anyone who has had any experience ... knows

that just being told to think happy thoughts is pretty much the very worst thing that anyone could propose in that sense.

Christine Cavalier: Right, and I think that your book brings out balance. At the end of the day, we're still talking about getting to that happiness point. We're just talking about a different way to get to that happiness point. That balance is definitely needed in the board room. I sit on a few boards of nonprofits myself. You can hear audible gasps when I play devil's advocate.

Oliver Burkeman: [Laughs]

Christine Cavalier: You know? I have no judgment of the situation. I'm in the Buddhist tradition just looking what is on the table, in the moment: "*What do we have now? What are our resources now? What is going wrong, right now? What is going correctly?*" If I bring up anything but the greatest, most wonderful, most positive achievements, the room goes silent. I don't find that that is the best way to make progress. Right?

Oliver Burkeman: Absolutely! The big part about it is that the really hostile response comes from a place positive thinking. If we could let go of this idea that we have to insist that everything was going to work out well all the time, then it wouldn't be a big downer to bring up something like that in a meeting. It would be fine. The sort of allergic response that you get, as if it's a radioactive sort of thing, it comes from building these walls, these mental walls, according to which everything has got to go one way.

Christine Cavalier: And you have some fantastic examples in the book, historical examples in the auto industry and others of how this can go deeply, deeply wrong. You talk about Barbara Ehrenreich, and how she examines what happened to the economy because of our delusions about progress and positive thinking and goal setting.

Oliver Burkeman: Right.

Christine Cavalier: And your examples are just very keen observations about how it go wrong and how those companies notice that it went wrong and have changed their ways. How have your habits changed after this journey?

Oliver Burkeman: Well, I'm more OK with not knowing exactly what going to happen or about something that is happening. Again, I don't want to over claim, but yeah, it's a sort of ummm, (pause)

Christine Cavalier: Peaceful?

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah, it's more peaceful, and it's easier to actually do things and make changes, to your life, or be OK with not making change, in much more successful in the long run, because you're not so fixated on this idea of success. I think I spent quite a few of my years as a very young adult thinking that next week I was going to launch the exercise plan or the work plan or whatever it might be that was going to

change everything forever and it would sort it out, and that I think is the sort of fresh start idea that is very deeply embedded in the self-help culture. If you're already prone to that kind of thinking, like I was, you shouldn't read most self-help books.

Christine Cavalier: [laughs] it will take you down the exact wrong path.

Oliver Burkeman: Right. Realizing that you're already in it, you can't, there's not going to be a fresh start. There's not going to be some big moment. You're already here now, and the point is to do you know, if you should be going to the gym more, just go to the gym. Don't like, sit, making a huge plan about how next week you're going to start the biggest revolutionary exercise plan known to humanity. Yeah. [laughs]

Christine Cavalier: Yeah, well ... being a Generation X-er, being raised in the wake of I'm OK, You're OK –

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah.

Christine Cavalier: – and positive thinking, motivational culture, from the 70s and 80s. We were kind of raised to think that there was this big moment coming down the pike for us. That [one] day we would [be] famous or the day that we would be rich or powerful. We're still waiting on those days because we were told: "*You can do anything!*"

Oliver Burkeman: Right!

Christine Cavalier: We were just infused with this idea that we will achieve a lot.

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah.

Christine Cavalier: Against all odds? So we're going to have a whole generation, all famous? You know? I think that is one of the reasons why my generation drives the social media scene... it's a mini form of celebrity and we were expecting that, we were told that, we were promised that.

Oliver Burkeman: Yes.

Christine Cavalier: We're getting into our midlife now, and we're looking around and going "*Is this it? Is this all there is?*" Some of us run to more and more motivational seminars and we keep trying to exercise that willpower muscle. It just leads us to a little bit more misery every day. Your book says, you know what, it might be OK to just as you quote, "*meander with purpose*" around your life. That's how most people in the history of the world have gotten through their lives. You can be quite happy that way and achieve more if you let it go, if you accept things as they come and live more in the moment.

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah. Absolutely. I mean, I think that the paradox of it really is that it's the better way to achieve some of that kind of extraordinary success. To sort of be OK with the idea that things are ordinary most of the time and you might have quite an

ordinary life. And sure it is also a better way to be able to do a few extraordinary things. So it sort of all goes in the same direction. I think what you say about everyone expecting to be super famous is very right on. We have quite a large difficulty with the idea that we might in certain ways not be special. [Laughs]

Christine Cavalier: Yeah! We might be obscure. We might have a normal, you know, average life. It's taboo, umm, for any of us to accept a limitation of one of our children, say.

Oliver Burkeman: Right. Right. I mean it's difficult, isn't it? It's a hard line to walk. Because you do want in your self or your children the idea that they can and should reach for things that they might otherwise be afraid to reach for. ... two things that traditional positivity culture ideas are ...myths. Firstly, you know, that **some things are actually not possible**. There's no point pretending that they are. Secondly, that **for those many things that are possible take a lot of effort**. ...The experience of failure is going to be a big part of getting there. Or of trying to get there.

Christine Cavalier: The positive thinking movement has not adequately addressed that failure and what to do when it comes. Because it will come. One of the things that is coming to my mind right now in the suburbs is the athletic prowess of children and the hopes of scholarship and glory of the parents for these children.

Oliver Burkeman: Right.

Christine Cavalier: The idea here is not realistic for most of these children, but their lives seem to get very difficult when that scholarship isn't offered.

Oliver Burkeman: Right.

Christine Cavalier: The parents are under the same illusion. A more tempered idea of just looking at the statistics ... [can] add into their decision-making process about what they are going to spend their time on.

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah. The only thing I want to qualify that with, lest anyone listening thinks we were just being utterly negativist, is that actually, you're completely right I think, but that mindset is also the right way to become one of those occasional superstars. ...

[But on the other hand] there's quite a bit of interesting work about people who are encouraged to think of themselves in sports as naturals: they lose their motivation to realize their potential. They don't need to push up against their limits. They think; it's just in them. So actually, being OK with the possibility of failure is certainly important if you are going to be one of the people who statistically is probably not to get the scholarship, or those top places. But it's also the best way to maximize your chances of getting to those top places. So it's kind of a win-win.

Christine Cavalier: But you know, Malcolm Gladwell talks about this, the difference between talent and hard work: His concept of 10,000 hours [of practice needed to become an expert]. The concept of talent, I think, really grows from the motivational and positive thinking realm. If you really look at that narrative of talent, in our biggest sports stars, you dig down a little more deeply and you'll see the 20,000 to 50,000 hours they spent [practicing]. Sure, a little bit of talent might have gotten their interest peaked, but really what's happening is that some people work harder than others. That message is just not popular.

Oliver Burkeman: Right. I don't think that contradicts what I was saying, because I find myself agreeing with it, but I think –

Christine Cavalier: – I'm saying that we have to watch that talent narrative.

Oliver Burkeman: Absolutely. Firstly, absolutely it's a question of effort and we also have to be aware, depending on whether it's nature or nurture, there are some people who are really just not in a position to put in as much effort as others. I think we need to be careful of about condemning them as having a moral failing because they don't have a personality that enables them to apply themselves with quite so much dedication. The other point that's worth saying, even if you do have that ability to apply yourself, that motivation to apply yourself, you're going to far better equipped to actually put that work in, if you understand it's encamped with failure, are often part of the process. Proof that you're pushing yourself, basically, rather than if you set these incredibly rigid high standards that I think positive thinking greatly encourages. When you run up against them, you just get incredibly de-motivated and frustrated.

Christine Cavalier: Yeah there are some good lessons out there, some good books that talk about how corporations should embrace failure. You do talk about a really interesting museum in the book. I won't reveal that. I won't spoil it for anybody. They have to read the book to see it. It's just so interesting, and actually quite a money-maker!

Oliver Burkeman: Thank you for drawing attention to it. Yes, I urge people to read the book.

Christine Cavalier: I urge people to read that, especially my listeners, many of [whom] work in marketing and social media and outreach. There's a lot in this book about what is going on in corporations when they make decisions about products and things. There's a lot of ways that boardrooms even stockholders can think about things in a bigger picture and take the good with the bad. It's a very timely and interesting journey that you have shared with us. I really do appreciate it. Thank you so much, Oliver, for joining me today.

Oliver Burkeman: It's been a pleasure. I'm really grateful for your interest and your excellent and challenging questions. [Laughs]

Christine Cavalier: [Laughs]

Oliver Burkeman: Thank you.

Christine Cavalier: [to audience] If you want to check out the book, go to www.oliverburkeman.com . It's The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking by Oliver Burkeman. Thank you so much Oliver!

Oliver Burkeman: It's a pleasure. Thank you.

OuttrOliver Burkeman:

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(music)Lyrics, Office Part II by The Matthew Show
The doors stay open but the seats stay filled,
the lid is childproof, but the people stay pilled,
the price has gone up for the prison yet to build,
The doors are wide open but church stays filled.

Work out.

Show Notes

PurpleCar Park notes:

music and intro provided by The Matthew Show: <http://thematthewshow.com/>

Barbara Ehrenreich: See interview here with Jon Stewart and Barbara Ehrenreich about her book "Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking Is Undermining America." <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-october-14-2009/barbara-ehrenreich> or check out Barbara's website at: <http://www.barbaraehrenreich.com/bright-sided.htm>

Julie Norem, author of the book The Positive Power of Negative Thinking: Using Defensive Pessimism to Harness Anxiety and Perform at Your Peak. The book's website: <http://defensivepessimism.com/>

Oprah magazine summary containing the quote from Dr. Norem's book that Mr. Burkeman cited about 1/3 of Americans instinctively use defensive pessimism: <http://www.oprah.com/spirit/Defensive-Pessimism-How-Negative-Thinking-Can-Pay-Off>

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Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000 hours concept. From his book Outliers
<http://www.gladwell.com/outliers/index.html>

National Geographic visualization of the 10,000 hours concept: [http://
newswatch.nationalgeographic.com/2012/08/14/malcolm-gladwells-10000-hour-rule-
visualized-practice-makes-perfect/](http://newswatch.nationalgeographic.com/2012/08/14/malcolm-gladwells-10000-hour-rule-visualized-practice-makes-perfect/)